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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the ways that love manifests itself in the story? Is *Entitlement*, at its core, a love triangle?
2. Does Fiona Aspinall change in the novel? If so, how, and who influences her most?
3. Colin resisted his father's control, but it didn't make him feel free. Given his longstanding unhappiness, why do you think Colin persisted in refusing to fall into line as an Aspinall? In what ways do you think he is like his father?
4. Trudy Clark holds the only hope the public has for access to the real truth behind the Aspinalls, but she fails at her task. What do you think the author is saying about investigative journalism, or even about truth itself?
5. When Andy Kronk made a deal with Mr. Aspinall, do you think he betrayed Colin? Did he have a choice?
6. Did this book make you think about class differently? Had



you thought much about the class structure in Canada before?

7. Is *Entitlement* a left-wing or a right-wing book? What do you think is the core message of the novel?
8. What is the role of America and England in the novel?

RELATED READING

Huntington House plays a prominent role in *Entitlement*. Some readers might see it as a character in its own right. As a symbol of the mighty Aspinall fortune, even it, in the end, could not stand up to the will of its owner — the final pages finishing the story *and* dismantling the metaphor.

There is a long history in English-language literature of large houses playing this role of symbol, character, and setting. Here's the author's list of a few well-known novels that employ stately houses as more than just a backdrop.

1. *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Evelyn Waugh
2. *The Last September* (1929), Elizabeth Bowen
3. *Howards End* (1910), E.M. Forster
4. *Atonement* (2001), Ian McEwan
5. *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Kazuo Ishiguro

INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN BENNETT

by Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer

Interview abridged from one originally featured in Bookninja magazine on September 22, 2008.

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KATHRYN: Jonathan, your first novel, *After Battersea Park*, is set both in Australia and Toronto; your second book, a collection of stories called *Verandah People*, is set entirely in Australia. And now *Entitlement*, a novel not just set largely in Toronto, but set among the jet set, the wealthy. I can't think of another topic more avoided in Canadian Letters. How did it happen that you found yourself delving here?

JONATHAN: I conceived of the novel in Australia. I was back on a trip about five years ago and was, very generously, sent

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for a few days away to a beautiful country inn in the southern highlands. It was off season. My wife and I found ourselves the sole guests in this fully staffed inn, that turns out was the former country estate of a well-known Sydney mercantile family.

It was very odd. Uncomfortably so, in many ways. And in other ways, after a time, well, I found myself thinking, if absolutely pressed, maybe one could adapt?

In any case, I've always loved "big house" novels — especially the early- and mid-twentieth century English ones, like *Brideshead Revisited* or *Howards End*. There's such a history of house as character. I'm a setting guy. I'm also, thematically, interested in class. So, here I am, walking these grounds as if to the manor born, enjoying staggeringly long dinners only to then be obliged to put a few glasses of fine Australian Muscat and Tokay's out of their sticky misery, and were that not enough to cope with, or maybe because of all this, suddenly I felt a novel coming on. But this presented a problem.

Sometime during the late writing and publishing of *Verandah People*, I made myself a promise that I'd move my writing over to where I now call home — Canada. I just couldn't keep setting books in Australia. I'm not there any more, haven't lived there since 1991, and I did not want to risk rewriting the same book, or be stuck eternally somewhere in the fading antipodean past. I like the present, presently at least.

So, the problem was, as you so neatly put it in your question, we don't really do class-themed novels featuring the wealthy in Canada. And that's what, I realized, I wanted to do. Well, why not find out why, was ultimately what I decided.

KATHRYN: While I read *Entitlement*, I got to thinking about my own lack of entitlement that I think may have something to do with a typical Canadian post-war upbringing (Who do you think you are, putting on airs?), a middle class disgust for anything showy. I wonder if, as much as the rich may shun the

poor, the middle class shun the rich. Are average Canadians afraid of success? And the obvious corollary to this question: how did you research this novel?

JONATHAN: The patriarchal figure in my novel, Mr. Aspinall, has thoughts on this. He opines, strongly, that the middle class in Canada, through an historical disinclination for conflict, aggression, or showiness, largely ignore the wealthy thereby permitting them a kind of invisibility. He rather likes it, and exploits it. To address one thing you said, I don't think he would suggest (but I wouldn't want to put words in his mouth) that the wealthy shun the poor — on the contrary he'd point to his foundation and philanthropic work. He does, though, point out the hypocrisies present in Canadian culture (on say immigration or aboriginal land rights), but instead of pointing the finger at those in charge or those with power, he points it right back at those who vote and are in charge of running the democracy, i.e., largely speaking, the middle class.

How did I research this? Well, some of it was just observation. The openness of class distinctions present in Australian and Canadian culture differs. I understood the one, so the other seemed askew and interesting to me. Class is very present in Canada, it's just a topic that's seen to be a bit gauche or something. So it simmers away unstirred by the middle class (if Mr. Aspinall is right, the rich quietly benefiting from the cover, the poor having no voice.) Why, I came to wonder, was it collectively decided that class, as a framework of understanding, was not germane to any meaningful investigation of national self with our literature?

Entitlement is malignant. The novel, through various characters and their perspectives, politics and positions, shows union members, lawyers, media, and old money as all entitled in various ways. It makes this point, I hope.

KATHRYN: The love story, such as it is, between the

protagonist, Andy Kronk, and Aspinall's son, Colin, is most poignant, and it is around this hub the story largely revolves. The tension derived less from the rich/poor paradigm than the normal/abnormal one is a new space, too. The wealthy Colin is a Wildean creature destined to extreme behaviours; Andy is the quintessential Canadian dream — a solid middle-class kid with hockey skills. Is not Andy's entitlement portrayed as benign — the entitlement ultimately to be oneself, especially in the face of choice?

JONATHAN: Maybe. A reading might also be that Andy is a puppet of the Aspinalls and lets himself be bought and used for one purpose or another because he's initially ambitious, but then gets in too deep and doesn't know how to break free. He makes a kind of Faustian pact with Mr. Aspinall after all. Whatever the reading, I don't personally see Andy's plight as benign. It's a story that finds bankrupt motives and nuanced outcomes on all sides.

As for their relationship, I have explored the quiet brutality of male relationships before. This one, now set in Canada, finds the same pain and power at play. This book is more overtly homoerotic than some previous work, but I don't see it as a homosexual novel. It's really a love triangle between brother and sister (Colin and Fiona Aspinall) and friend (Andy). I don't think there's an appropriate coupling anywhere in Huntington House.

KATHRYN: Jonathan, could you speak directly to the comment you made about entitlement being malignant? How so? Why? And must it be? Also, in light of that comment, would you say that Colin and his sister, Fiona, and by association Andy, are then formed by entitlement? What I'm wondering, I suppose, is how does this malignancy play itself out?

JONATHAN: The novel, I hope, portrays entitlement thematically, and not in a didactic or pedantic way that gets in the way

of the story proper. The book's got a plot. Having said that, I'd hope readers take from the story that the idea of entitlement is dangerous and harmful. In the Americanised world in which we all live, it seems, increasingly, there is no possibility of failure: only working towards success; no opening to admit mediocrity as a final state of affairs: only a brazen belief in "next time." These are not hollow words. These were once aspirations or motivations, but they have metastasized — to push the analogy too far — into full-fledged rights.

It's a serious state of dissolution. And it's on shop floors and in boardrooms, in waiting rooms and classrooms. Everyone has the right to more, better, faster. Their claim is infallible and the logic for it is based on their own existence. This is harmful because it weakens the collective good and furthermore, as a state, it lacks compassion, empathy, and kindness. How, as a society, can we deliver perfection to the never-satisfied? Even in death those who love us are now seemingly entitled to be pain free. We've pathologized mourning and have outsourced to grief counselors any healthy need to not cope, and just be fucked up for a while.

We expect this sort of disillusionment from the offspring of the wealthy, such as Fiona and Colin. At least there, there is noblesse oblige — he says cheekily. But the entitlement exists elsewhere in the story, in Andy's unionist father who steals from his employer and justifies it by equating it with the brass getting Air Miles, and in Andy himself when he takes advantage of a young women (in fact, two) because he's handsome and sure. I hope the book pokes its barbed theme into all the characters.

KATHRYN: Jonathan, I have heard it said by a few people, you included, I think, that this book is stylistically a departure from your earlier writing, which has been characterized as lyrical. Of course, you have recently published a collection of poetry, *Here is my street, this tree I planted*. Is this a form/function

decision? Also, I'm curious about the limitations you set yourself around punctuation. It is markedly more difficult to write fiction without dialogue punctuation, for instance; what is the payout to you in terms of craft for this decision?

JONATHAN: I've spoken before about my penchant for the lyrical line. It's the long-standing David Malouf influence I endure. But, now I've written two novels, a collection of stories, and a book of poems, I've come to see the laden lyrical line as burdensome for the reader of a novel. It gets in the way of the story, is too showy. I used every bit of everything I had to keep this novel within its own form, not over-tighten, and not clot it with poetic lines and images. (That said, yep, I left some in.) These days, when I feel these urges come on, I write a poem. I've gained a respect for the novel form. I began, ten years ago, wanting to all but destroy it. Now, I submit to it, because there is a time and place for everything. And, while I know Canadian Poetry will never fully let me be an insider because I write more fiction than I do poetry and they hate part-timers, I simply enjoy writing poems and I'll just keep doing it anyway.

You asked about the stylistic decision to write dialogue without quotation marks. My brother in Australia is into cars. One day I was in the passenger seat and we were bombing along Sydney's twisty streets, and I noticed sometimes he was shifting gears without engaging the clutch. When I asked him about this, he said if you get the revs exactly right, it's unnecessary. I don't know if this is true, but I like what it means. Kathryn, you know, for a book that has a whole section which is a formal taped interview, dropping the quotation marks seemed to declutter the page, at times destabilized the line between direct speech, indirect speech, interior monologue, and thought — and all of that worked for my purposes. I like the free play and the uncertainty — as long as it doesn't pull the reader out.



KATHRYN: *Entitlement* seems to me a tragedy not of Andy

Kronk, but of Colin Aspinall. It is Colin whose station is reduced, after all. He cannot be fulfilled in any way, and once he finally tries for some middle road, he is cruelly stopped. Andy's ability to maneuver freely is limited by the Aspinall family's entitlement, but his limitations leave him much as his father lived, with a little hope, and large emotional burden. Is this not the parameter most Canadians live within? Surely, all our lives cannot be viewed as tragic?

JONATHAN: Well, I suspect you're being purposefully provocative but, to get at the beginning of your question, yes that reading of which one, Andy or Colin, is the tragic figure is indeed there. Might not be the only or right one, though. I'm not sure it's my job to answer the latter half of the question. So I'll parry. Is it inevitable that it be writ large in the way you suggest? If you strip away the misguided entitlement, must you be left with tragedy? Might not you simply be left with the reality most Canadians live within?

KATHRYN: Purposefully provocative? Me? Jonathan, will you speak a little about your writing process with this book? It is a diversion from your previous work, certainly in terms of voice; how did you go about constructing this novel?

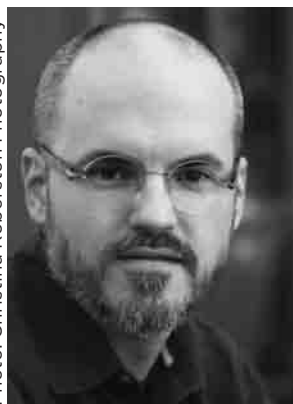
JONATHAN: I wrote my first novel the hard way — through a very free and open-ended process of discovery. Then I spent enormous energy re-writing and editing into something I liked. With this one, I actually constructed the shape of it ahead of time: a novel idea, that, using an outline. Turns out it makes the writing process more manageable. It took me longer, but we had two children during the writing, which slowed me down, as you might expect, or even hope. Still, I did do some small but important structural editing with Michael Holmes, my editor at ECW Press. What I learned about writing and novels through this book I don't yet know. It will take a year or two after publication when I'll begin to see exactly what I did right,



and wrong. The aftermath. I think that's the most instructive part of processes for me. Because really, how could I begin another one without completely digesting what I'd done previously? So, for now, I'll write some more poems as I let this book go off and "be" for a while.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo: Christina Roberston Photography



JONATHAN BENNETT is the author of two novels, a collection of short stories and two books of poetry. He is a winner of the K.M. Hunter Artists' Award in Literature. His work has appeared widely in journals and magazines including *The Walrus*, *Descant*, *Globe and Mail*, *Antipodes*, and the *Literary Review of Canada*. Born in Vancouver, raised in Sydney, Australia, Bennett lives near Peterborough in the village of Keene, Ontario.